

The Black Death

The attached pages are excerpts from primary sources from the 14th century. These are the actual words of men and women who lived and died with the Black Death in different parts of Europe. You will need to read these carefully and base your fictional journal entry on the ideas and opinions presented in these pages.

Imagine that you are a young person living in a village or town in Europe during the middle of the 14th century (1340-1360). Merchants unknowingly sick with the plague have just arrived in your town for a fair. Describe the events that take place at the fair and also the feeling among townspeople when they realize their town has been inflicted by plague.

Be sure to address these questions in your journal entry: How do I make sense of the disaster of the plague? What do I think caused the plague? How did you try to prevent yourself from catching near-certain death? Discuss the effects of losing half of the population of the village.

8. The plague in France according to the Great Chronicle

The great chronicle of France was kept by the monks of Saint-Denis, a project initiated by St Louis in the thirteenth century. For the early part of the reign of Philip VI their account is based on another chronicle (the continuation of the chronicle of Guillaume de Nangis), but from 1340 the Saint-Denis account is independent and, in the opinion of its editor, the description of the plague is that of an eye witness. The previous year's entry recounts the advance of the plague from Lombardy to Provence and Languedoc.

Jules Viard (ed), *Les Grandes Chroniques de France*, IX, Paris, 1937, pp. 314-16.

In the year of grace 1348 the aforementioned plague reached the kingdom of France, and lasted more or less one and a half years, with such vigour that in Paris 800 people were dying every day. The plague broke out in a country town named Roissy, near Connesse, some three leagues from Saint-Denis. It was most pitiful to see the bodies of the dead in such great quantities; for in the space of a year and a half, so it was said, the number of deaths in Paris rose to more than 50,000, and in the town of Saint-Denis to around 16,000. Yet despite the fact that people were dying in such numbers, nonetheless they all received confession and the other sacraments.

It happened that during this pestilence, two monks of Saint-Denis, being sent on a visitation at the command of their abbot, were riding through a town where they saw men and women dancing to the sound of drum and bagpipe and making merry. The monks asked the people why they were dancing, and they replied, 'We have seen our neighbours die, and are seeing them die daily, but since the plague has not entered our town, we hope that our merry-making will keep it away, and this is why we are dancing'. So the monks left to carry out their mission. When they had accomplished their task, they set out on their return journey and passed through the same town, but found there very few people, all with sad faces. So the monks asked them, 'Where are the men and women who not long ago were making so merry in this town?' And they replied, 'Alas, good lords, the wrath of God came upon us in a hailstorm, for a great hailstorm came from the sky and fell on our town and all around, so suddenly that some people were killed by it, and others died of fright, not knowing where to go or which way to turn'.

9. The plague in Central Europe

This account is taken from the chronicle of the monastery of Neuberg in southern Austria.

Continuatio Novimontensis, ed. G. H. Pertz *Monumenta Germaniae Historica - scriptorum* IX, Hanover, 1851, pp. 674-6.

In 1348, on the feast of the Conversion of St Paul [25 January] at the hour of vespers, a terrible earthquake struck the whole region, although it can be shown to have been particularly severe in the city of Villach. For there, while people were assembled to worship in the churches, all of a sudden the buildings collapsed, killing the people in them on the spot. The shock virtually demolished the city wall and other buildings as well, and countless people who could not make their escape from the devastation quickly enough were killed. The fortifications of castles and towns were also thrown down all of a sudden.

In the same year there were immense upheavals in many parts of the world, as the result of a cruel pestilence which first broke out in countries across the sea and killed everyone in various horrifying ways. First, through the malignant influence of the planets and the corruption of the air, men and animals in those countries were struck motionless while going about their business, as if turned to stone. Then, in the countries where ginger comes from, a deadly rain fell, mixed with serpents and all sorts of pestilential worms, and instantly killed everyone it touched. Not far from that country dreadful fire descended from heaven and consumed everything in its path; in that fire even stones blazed like dry wood. The smoke which arose was so contagious that merchants watching from a long way off were immediately infected and several died on the spot. Those who escaped carried the pestilence with them, and infected all the places to which they brought their merchandise - including Greece, Italy and Rome - and the neighbouring regions through which they travelled.

As a result the inhabitants, frantic with terror, ordered that no foreigners should stay in the inns, and that the merchants by whom the pestilence was being spread should be compelled to leave the area immediately. The deadly plague reigned everywhere, and once populous cities, because of the death of their inhabitants, now kept their gates firmly shut so that no one could break in and steal the possessions of the dead. In Venice the death toll was so heavy that scarcely a quarter of the people remained alive. The pestilence thrust forward through Carinthia and then brutally took possession of Styria,

driving men almost mad with despair.²⁷

Scholars could not decide whether such a deadly year was due to the vagaries of the planets or the corrupted air, but could only commit everything to God's will. Accordingly people began to make public demonstrations of their penitence, in the hope that God would look mercifully upon the human race. Men gathered together from cities and towns and went devoutly in procession from church to church, walking two by two, totally naked except for a white cloth covering them from their loins to their ankles, singing beautiful hymns in honour of the Passion in their mother tongue and beating themselves so hard with knotted whips that drops of blood spattered the roadway. When the chapels closed after vespers, women humbly followed them. This habit of flagellation lasted from Michaelmas to Easter. In addition regular and secular clergy frequently carried relics around their churches with prayers to avert the impending disaster, and the pope appointed special prayers, which it would be tiresome to itemise. But when prayers failed to prevent it, when indeed the misery increased daily to a pitch never before recorded in the history of the world, and when the efforts of physicians proved unable to cure or avert it, then all they could do was to commit everything to God.

The signs which generally preceded the pestilence were red apostumes dotted around the genitals or under the armpits, and those victims with no hope of recovery voided blood. From the latter there issued a pestilential stink, which infected those who visited them or attended their funeral. It was very common for the death of one person to be followed by the death of everyone else in the house, so that it was hardly possible to find anyone living there; and it seemed to be the natural course of things that those related by blood should die at the same time.

Because of this great and widespread devastation flocks wandered shepherdless in the fields, for no one was prepared to risk his life to gather them in, and the ravening wolves which sought to attack them turned tail and bolted after one look.²⁸ The goods and chattels bequeathed by the dead were given a wide berth by all, as if they too were infected. The mortality always peaked around the time of the new moon.

²⁷ Carinthia is now Karnten, a province of southern Austria. Styria is represented by Steiermark in southern Austria and by Stajersko, across the border in Slovenia.

²⁸ The implication appears to be that the wolves sensed the infection.

CONTINENTAL EUROPE

The pestilence descended on the Neuberg estates around the feast of St Martin²⁹ and killed many monks and tenants. People were deeply distressed by these terrible events, and thoughtful men resolved that they should try to cheer each other up with comfort and merrymaking, so that they were not overwhelmed by depression. Accordingly wherever they could they held parties and weddings with a cheerful heart, so that by rekindling a sort of half-happiness they could avoid despair.

In 1349 the kings and princes of our country, although previously at each others' throats, all allied in friendship. A great flood did extensive damage everywhere. The contagious plague came in due course to Vienna and all its territories, and as a result countless people died and scarcely a third of the population remained alive. Because of the stench and horror of the corpses they were not allowed to be buried in churchyards, but as soon as life was extinct they had to be taken to a communal burial ground in God's Field outside the city, where in a short time five big deep pits were filled to the brim with bodies. The pestilence lasted from Pentecost [31 May] to Michaelmas [29 September]. It cruelly attacked not only Vienna but other places round about, and it did not spare monks and nuns, for 53 monks died in Heiligenkreuz at that time. The hateful signs described above were no respecters of persons, but marked all those carrying the plague.

The best wine was easily come by, and all those who indulged in it to excess behaved as if they were mad, beating and abusing people for no reason. Survivors of the plague, apparently putting the terrible experience right out of their minds, embroiled themselves in many disputes and quarrels over the wealth of the dead, or shamelessly went beyond the bounds of decency and, in many cases, lived with no reference to the law.

Nobles and citizens, seeking to escape death, took themselves to safer places, but they had already been infected and so in spite of their efforts many were unable to escape and died.

²⁹ There are two feasts of St Martin and the chronicler does not specify which is intended, but the chronology of his narrative suggests St Martin in winter is meant: 11 November. The word translated here as descended [*descendit*] carries the sense of turning aside and could therefore be translated in the opposite sense: that the plague died down in November – a reading preferred by Cardinal Gasquet, *The Great Pestilence*, London, 1895, p. 62. There seems little doubt, however, that the chronicler is describing the plague's arrival rather than its departure.

II: The plague in the British Isles

10. The arrival of the plague at Bristol

This brief account comes from the Anonimale Chronicle, which covers the period up to 1381.¹ It was written by an unknown author, probably in the north of England – although its author seems not to have been very interested in the spread of the plague northwards.

The Anonimale Chronicle, ed. V. H. Galbraith, Manchester, 1970, p. 50.

In 1348, about the feast of St Peter in chains [1 August] the first pestilence arrived in England at Bristol, carried by merchants and sailors, and it lasted in the south country around Bristol throughout August and all winter. And in the following year, that is to say, in 1349, the pestilence began in the other regions of England and lasted for a whole year, with the result that the living were hardly able to bury the dead.

11. The arrival of the plague near Bristol

This is taken from the continuation of Ralph Higden's *Polychronicon*. Higden was a monk of the Benedictine monastery of St Werburgh's, Chester, who died in the early 1360s. His work is a history of the world from its creation until 1340. It was enormously popular, and many religious houses had their own copies, to which they added continuations. Indeed Higden himself added brief entries covering the period 1341–52, which were in turn incorporated into some of the other continuations.

C. Babington and J. R. Lumby (eds), *Polychronicon Radulphi Higden Monachi Cantuarii*, 9 vols, Rolls Series, 1865–86, VII pp. 344–6, 355.

In 1348 there was inordinately heavy rain between Midsummer and Christmas, and scarcely a day went by without rain at some time in the day or night. During that time a great mortality of men spread across the world and was especially violent in and around the Roman Curia at Avignon, and around the coastal towns of England and Ireland.

This year around the feast of St John [24 June] the aforesaid pestilence attacked the Bristol area and then travelled to all the other

¹ I have taken the details about each source from Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England II: c.1307 to the early sixteenth century*, London, 1982.

parts of England in turn, and it lasted in England for more than a year. Indeed it raged so strongly that scarcely a tenth of mankind was left alive. A mortality of animals followed in its footsteps, then rents dwindled, land fell waste for want of the tenants who used to cultivate it, and so much misery ensued that the world will hardly be able to regain its previous condition. Few, virtually none, of the lords and great men died in this pestilence.

12. The arrival of the plague in Dorset

The following brief account comes from the chronicle compiled by the Franciscans of Lynn (now King's Lynn) in Norfolk.

Antonia Gransden (ed), 'A Fourteenth-Century Chronicle from the Grey Friars at Lynn', *English Historical Review* LXXII, 1957, p. 274.

In 1348 two ships, one of them from Bristol, landed at Melcombe in Dorset a little before Midsummer. In them were sailors from Gascony who were infected with an unheard of epidemic illness called pestilence. They infected the men of Melcombe, who were the first to be infected in England. The first inhabitants to die from this illness of pestilence did so on the Eve of St John the Baptist [23 June], after being ill for three days at most.

In 1349, at about Easter or a little earlier, pestilence broke out in East Anglia and lasted for the whole summer.

13. The plague spreads

The *Eulogium*, from which this extract is taken, was modelled on the *Polychronicon* [11] and surveys the history of the world from the creation. It was compiled at Malmesbury Abbey (Wiltshire) in the 1360s.

F. S. Haydon (ed), *Eulogium Historiarum sive Temporis*, 3 vols, Rolls Series, 1856–63, III pp. 213–14.

In 1348, at about the feast of the Translation of St Thomas the martyr [7 July], the cruel pestilence, hateful to all future ages, arrived from countries across the sea on the south coast of England at the port called Melcombe in Dorset. Travelling all over the south country it wretchedly killed innumerable people in Dorset, Devon and Somerset. It was, moreover, believed to have been just as cruel among pagans as Christians. Next it came to Bristol, where very few were left alive, and then travelled northwards, leaving not a city, a town, a village, or